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Recollection/Re-Collection: a Re-positioning of Artificial Nature in the Natural World

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RECOLLECTION/RE-COLLECTION

A Re-positioning of Artificial Nature in the Natural World

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts
Visual Arts

by
Martha A. Epp-Carter
December 2009

Accepted by:
Sydney Cross, Committee Chair
Christina Hung
Todd McDonald
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ABSTRACT

In this body of work I explore the division between our experiences with nature in a controlled environment versus the less frequent experience of true nature. I concern myself with the distance we create for ourselves by diminishing our interactions with nature, making them convenient, not messy or intrusive. I also attempt to resensitize the viewer to his or her own conscious or unconscious response to nature. By setting up situations that utilize both real and artificial objects, images and materials, I place the viewer in a relationship with the work that requires thoughtful attention.

Through the creation of symbols and fictional spaces, the prints and two-dimensional works function as indexes of objects and memory. Using the visual language of line and drawing, these fictional landscapes are both unusual, and grounded in the familiar. They are unusual in that they depict illogical scenarios that are often confusing and unexpected, and familiar in that I use recognizable and common elements of the landscape.

In my sculpture I use commercially produced, artificial facsimiles that function as stand-ins for nature. I parody these materials to sensitize the viewer to their absurdity. In doing so I question these material's role in our lives as well as their cultural purpose.

In my thesis I address societal issues that run contrary to my sense of responsibility as part of humankind. My artwork provides me with the opportunity to explore these issues in a tangible way. My practice is to embrace the absurd, accept the unexpected and re-present it in a way so as to examine its validity and role in my life. I show my examinations of these situations through my art and encourage others to examine their observations and assumptions as well.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my Dad who always believed in me, and to my Mom who continues to believe. It is through their examples that I came to an understanding of my self and my place in this world.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

“When the student is ready the teacher will appear.” (Buddhist Proverb)

In my case, a whole department appeared, full of wise and generous faculty and other students ready to learn as well. For all of them, faculty and students, I am grateful.

The members of my thesis committee, Syd Cross, Christina Hung, Todd McDonald and Anderson Wrangle, helped me through this process with guidance, trust, encouragement and humor. I could not have found a better mentor than Syd and the opportunity to learn from her is truly a gift.

Dave Detrich nurtured my three-dimensional explorations and Andrea Fesser helped me to see that research is a crucial part of studio practice.

I’d like to thank both of my brothers who have been instrumental in my art making from the start. Michael was my first and most profound drawing teacher. Mark encouraged my sense of humor. They both helped me to embrace absurdity in life-affirming ways.

Finally, I am deeply grateful for my husband, Marshall who is a blessing to me. His belief in me is unwavering and I truly could not have done this without him.

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INTRODUCTION

Growing up in the 1960s in the agricultural Midwest, in the holistic, gardening, yoga practicing, meditating, and matriarchal clan that was my family, my whole life revolved around the “outdoors.” Nature was not separate from me; I was a part of nature, as I was a part of my family, my home, my school, and my friends.

No matter the weather, I was always outside. It was never too hot or too cold. We either dressed for it or ignored it. There was power in that relationship. We took what we found in nature and made stuff. A fort built of branches and mud; a tunnel dug under the ground and supported with scavenged two by fours and plywood; an igloo formed from packed snow as a home for the St. Bernard.

Identifying plants, bugs, animals, weather: these were all lessons I learned from my parents and on my own. There was a freedom in my life that supported these explorations and nurtured in me a curiosity that stays with me today. That curiosity exists side by side with a respect for nature; I see it as an extension of my self, my home and my soul. It is this sensed connection that fuels my outrage at what I see as a cultural disconnection and distancing from nature, and thus ultimately from ourselves.

This society-wide disconnect manifests itself in our growing attraction to and comfort with virtual experiences and artificial expressions of nature. More and more, we accept secondary experiences rather than primary ones. Additionally, we are becoming a more materialistic society, basing our pursuit of happiness on our pursuit of these secondary, processed experiences that nature does not provide; we provide them ourselves. Let it be clear that in my work and in the writing of this thesis I am not taking a judgmental stance. I am just as much a consumer as a tree-hugger, a comfort driven creature of habit as an explorer. The latest fashion, food and wine, and newest cars were also obsessions in my home, and I found comfort in department stores, boutiques and discos when not exploring the great outdoors. Acknowledging this schism and my

place in the middle of these camps allows me to mine my own personal experiences and behaviors as influences in my work. Therefore, my work for this thesis exhibit is my expression of observations not only of others but also of myself.

Through the creation of symbols and fictional spaces, the prints and two-dimensional works function as indexes of objects and memory. Using the visual language of line and drawing, these fictional landscapes are both unusual, and grounded in the familiar. They are unusual in that they depict illogical scenarios that are often confusing and unexpected, and familiar in that I use recognizable and common elements of the landscape.

In my sculpture I use commercially produced, artificial facsimiles as stand-ins for nature and parody these materials to sensitize the viewer to their absurdity. In doing so I question these material's role in our lives as well as their cultural purpose.

CHAPTER 1

STUDIO PRACTICE and METHODOLOGY

Two years ago I made a simple spinner; the kind that comes with board games. I had been making many habitual choices in my studio practice and I wanted to break out of that. Using the spinner as an instrument of chance selection, I replaced those habits with chance choices made by each spin, thus options were selected for me, outside of my control. As a way of working, this was an exciting and unpredictable challenge. However, the more I let the spinner make decisions for me, the less responsibility I had in the work. Over time, relying on the spinner became habitual as well, and I felt distanced from the work in a way that rendered my concerns and concepts vague. Instead of abandoning the spinner completely, I have found a way to balance its influence with a more self-directed and non-automatic practice that places the onus squarely in my hands. Now, the spinner has come to represent issues outside my studio practice, pointing to the randomness of consequences that are often the result of choices made by humankind. With this in mind, I made “Your Turn, My Turn, Our Turn,” a video of an anonymous hand repeatedly spinning the pointer on the spinner with no sign of results, consequences, win or lose.

Using decision-making tools and shooting simple videos are just parts of my studio practice. Primarily, I am a printmaker. My obsession with line, value shifts and process is best expressed with the visual language inherent in printmaking. But, I am also a tinkerer, compelled to alter, adjust and change objects to my liking. Because of this, I also work three-dimensionally to address concerns that are conceptually material-based and that need to be physically animated or realized to point out these material concerns. The three-dimensional work allows me to present the viewer with a different encounter than in the two-dimensional work, and links directly to materials that support the parody in my work.

My interest is the division between our experiences with nature in a controlled environment versus the less frequent experience of true nature. I concern myself with the distance we create for ourselves by diminishing our interactions with nature, making them convenient, not messy or intrusive. I also attempt to resensitize the viewer to his or her own conscious or unconscious response to nature. By setting up situations that utilize both real and artificial objects, images and materials, I place the viewer in a relationship with the work that requires thoughtful attention. Humankind is increasingly creating alternatives to nature by copying, in a nostalgic way, the natural world that used to be more available to us. It's as though we are longing to return to a greater connection to nature, but our recreations are clumsy and in the end only serve to distance us even more.ⁱ

In his book, *Second Nature*, Michael Pollen argues “the habit of bluntly opposing nature and culture has only gotten us into trouble, and we won’t work ourselves free of this trouble until we have developed a more complicated and supple sense of how we fit into nature.”ⁱⁱ There is a double entendre in the phrase “second nature.” The most common use refers to a given phenomenon, characteristic, or behavior that appears to be natural, expected, or inherent to a person or creature because it has been practiced for so long. The way Pollen uses the phrase has developed out of what environmentalists observe to be happening between nature and contemporary culture.

My goal is to encourage the viewer to re-consider their sense of how they fit into nature. Visually I employ fantasy layered with familiar environments and materials, and an assumption (or perhaps hope) that I tap into a vein of compassion stemming from recognition on the part of the viewer that results in empathy and self-reflection.



Fig. 1: Pop Up Deer

I often combine mass-produced representations of animals with my own work. (See Figure 1) I appropriate these animals to provoke empathy. These toy animals simultaneously represent the animal they portray as well as the culture that produced them – a culture that is comfortable with nature as long as it is convenient and entertaining. These toys are cultural representations of reality, but also fantasy. Through play we learn to empathize, take control, give up control, create and destroy. We project the way things are as well as the way we'd like things to be. These small, inert animals represent a manageable and controllable type of nature, onto which contemporary society easily projects empathy. This empathy is for the animal and its condition *and* for humankind and our vulnerability in relationship to each other and our status on the planet. I see this empathy toward artificial animals and manufactured nature as a contemporary paradigm shift in our collective thinking as a society and as a boundary crossing that blurs the line between reality and fantasy.

To fully express my observations regarding this intersection between nature and contemporary society, I feel it is important that I use more than one medium. I find that my prints and drawings slow the viewer down, requiring a close read of the imagery and thus a progressive, not instantaneous, understanding of the message. The etchings satisfy for me a journaling and diaristic approach to my expression. Many of the etchings have actual writing in them. In etching, this writing is done on the copper plate, usually through a ground, before the plate is submerged in acid. Due to the reversal in printmaking, this writing must be done backwards and from right to left. I write into my prints so much that this process has become second nature (the first definition) for me. The ease with which I do this allows for an effortless stream-of-conscious expression and the printed result belies the counterintuitive process used to produce it.

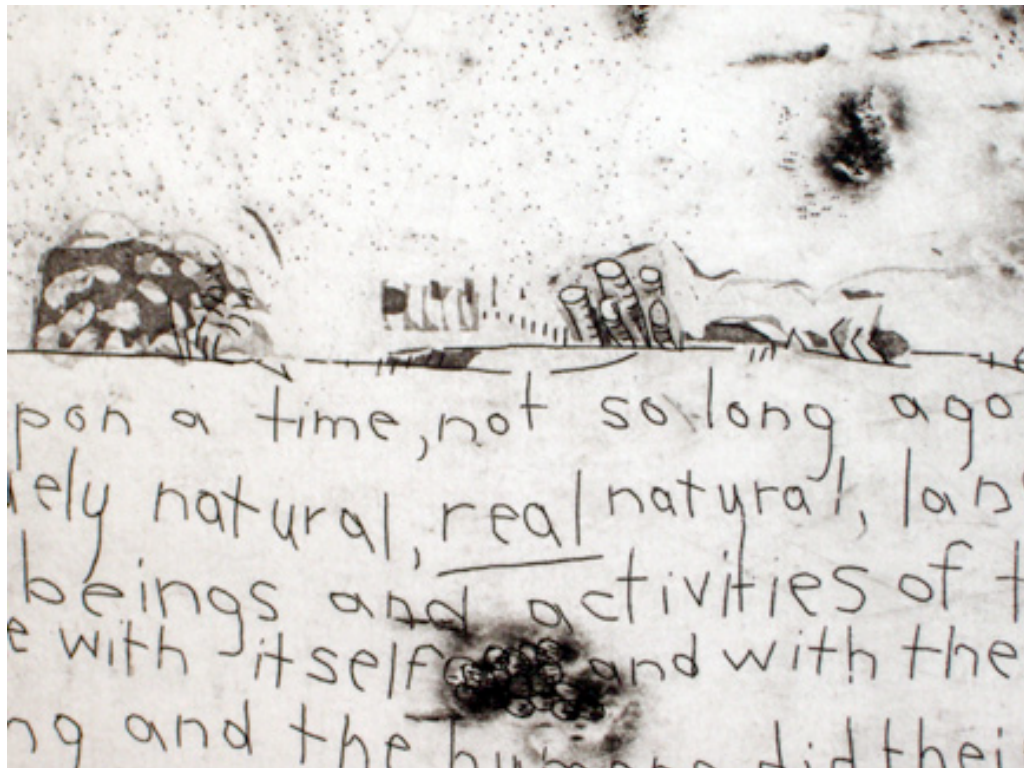


Fig. 2: Origin (detail)

In these prints I create imagined worlds wherein something unmanageable has happened and I reveal the results. There is often a post-apocalyptic sense to the environments I create. Usually they reflect my conjecture of what would remain in the landscape at the conclusion of the damage we are already inflicting on the world. I call these *after-worlds*. The prints operate culturally by suggesting to the viewer that something is wrong, out of place or deconstructed in what is presumed to be a common landscape. The choices I make with regard to images in the prints and drawings deliberately clue the viewer in to a question or an observation of an event that I have imagined based on current societal and cultural concerns.

In the sculptures, by repurposing mass-produced, artificial objects I communicate current cultural values, through representations of nature in less than natural forms. These materials reflect our cultural understanding of nature and point to the ridiculousness of nature in consumerism and toys. They are materials that are familiar to both the viewer and me, but by using them in a new way, I break the familiar narrative and allow a new one to be formed.

In all my work, whatever the media, curiosity, experimentation and chance play an important role. The results of “what happens if I do this...” open or close doors to ideas and projects. This curiosity and sensitivity to unexpected results has its root in those early years of direct contact with nature and opportunities for serious play.



Fig. 3: Hedgebear Deity

CHAPTER 2 CONCEPTUAL CONSIDERATIONS

By asking the viewer to put aside assumptions, I also ask them to stand in my shoes, to see the world through *my* eyes. Lifton and Humphrey say in their 1984 compilation *In a Dark Time: Images for Survival*, “Human wisdom has been the wisdom of the seer: the poet, painter, or peasant revolutionary, who, when the current world view failed, turned the kaleidoscope of his or her imagination until familiar things took on a wholly different pattern. Such can and must be our imaginative strategy now.”ⁱⁱⁱ

This turning of the kaleidoscope is an important part of my studio practice. As I work, I surround myself with an assortment of materials. At first, I engage in that serious play mentioned earlier, butting disparate objects against each other, placing a mass-produced toy directly on an etching, or attaching an artificial leaf to a battery-powered creature. As I do this, I’m looking for combinations that not only support my conceptual concerns, but that also surprise me. This process leads me toward unexpected results,

which are reinforced by my tendency to embrace the absurd. The finished piece then provokes the viewer to take their own leap of faith, suspending what they expect to see, exploring instead what is there. Absurdism is evident in many of the choices I make. This is where surprise comes in. *Hedgebear Deity* (See Figure 3) is one example of this practice. I had to take a leap of faith, be open to chance, and act beyond my own expectations to combine an artificial clump of moss with the head of a plastic bear.

In support of the connection to the absurd in my work, I refer to Absurdist philosophy and Surrealism. First, the idea of the absurd is what Absurdist philosophers consider the “humanly impossible.”^{iv} In this philosophy, the absurd arises when there is a disconnection between humankind’s search for meaning and the apparent meaninglessness, or chaos in the universe. In the course of one’s life, there are many experiences that may evoke a sense of absurdity. According to Absurdist philosophy, these experiences leave the individual with one of three choices: suicide, a leap of faith or recognition. In my studio practice and in my life, I choose to rely on two of those three choices: a leap of faith, partnered with recognition and acceptance of the absurd. Again, from de Silentio: this leap is “where one believes that there is more than the rational life (aesthetic or ethical). To take a leap of faith, one must act with the virtue of the absurd, where a suspension of the ethical may need to exist. This faith has no expectations, but is a flexible power initiated by a recognition of the absurd.”^v This leads me to Surrealism. In 1924, Andre Breton wrote his Surrealist manifesto declaring that surrealism is: “Psychic automatism in its pure state...Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.”^{vi} To this end, the main convention used by the Surrealists and Dadaists was to create an illogical scenario that took from the familiar world and then re-presented imagery in irrational, unfamiliar ways. The surrealists also broke from many of the refinements of fine art and style, grabbing visual stimuli from mass-cultural phenomena around them.

In my work, I use the absurd and conventions of surrealism to exaggerate a cultural phenomenon, in this case a societal view that sees synthetic forms as acceptable stand-ins for nature. If, as mentioned above, the Surrealists aim was to *create an illogical scenario*, my practice differs somewhat from theirs in that I not only create illogical scenarios, but also observe scenarios that already exist and point to them through the lens of absurdity and nonsense. Parody and satire are critical tools in this practice as well. Where there is humor in my work, there usually also exists a serious commentary on societal morés and norms.

A clarification is needed here. Both the Absurdist and Surrealist see their practice as a “suspension of the ethical” and “exempt from moral concern.” (See above) While I agree with most of the Absurdist and Surrealist conceits, the only way my work touches on these two aspects is in the irreverence I show with regard to certain materials and my disregard for their common use. While I use toys that were made to remain whole and to serve a particular purpose, my cutting apart and repurposing these items is intentionally irreverent and absurd. My expectation is that viewers will understand that these are just plastic animals and toys and that my purpose is to use these stand-ins in the ways I’ve already described; to put forth a moral commentary on what I see as immoral conditions arising out of my own and society’s actions, and to deliver that commentary with intentional irreverence to awaken in the viewer a response.



Fig. 4: Consumed/Engulfed



Fig. 5: Deer Pile

CHAPTER 3

DISCUSSION OF SELECTED WORKS

The first in a series of drawings I did in the fall of 2007 is an ink drawing with hand-written capital letters spelling out “Things that Get Left Behind” across the top of the page. (See Figure 6) At the time I made this drawing, I was commuting to school from an hour away. I would leave early in the morning and return home late at night. I was struck by how many things I was leaving behind. In a dark moment, I started drawing these things, willing them into my studio with me.



Fig. 6: Left Behind

There are many disparate items in this drawing. There is a car, a bicycle, a dog and a cat. There is also a cluster of abstracted, unidentified objects that are related to each other by the way they are drawn, the quality of line, the delicate attention paid to detail. There is a pig's face next to these objects and a streetlight in a group of circles. A house and trees occupy the background, the bike and abstracted objects the middle ground and the dog and cat, the foreground. This positioning sets up a hierarchy. The objects are drawn with pale diluted ink, allowing them to fade, blur and blend into the

setting thus conveying a dreamlike memory of these losses. Initially, this was a drawing about personal losses and a comprehensive catalogue of what I'd left behind. However, using formal strategies to set up this hierarchy of losses, I then use non-specific, abstracted objects to provoke in the viewer a question about what might remain and how they might consider some of their own losses.

Shortly after drawing *Left Behind*, I was driving home late at night, and I hit a deer. This immediately changed my relationship to deer and I started investigating the changing lives of the deer around us; how we impact their lives and how they impact ours. In a series of drawings, *Deer Drawings 1, 2, 3, and 4* (See Figures 7 - 10) there are deer, sometimes only a few and sometimes a small herd, and always running.



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10

In *Deer Drawing 4* (Fig. 10) the deer are cut from a glossy, color magazine page and collaged onto the drawing. They are photographed deer, slipped into a hand-drawn ink, graphite and wash drawing at once both compositionally suited to their setting and out of place. Using the magazine deer in this way, I started my practice of combining mass-produced images with my own hand-drawn images. Specific to this drawing, the glossy deer reinforce the current condition of deer showing up where they don't belong.

In all four drawings the deer are not only running, they are running *from* something—a threat that only the viewer can see. The threats are odd: a barren and clear cut forest; a transparent column with a huge, arching tongue; a steel, expandable arrow also cut from a magazine; a rocket or torpedo outlined as though it is a constellation. These images are created by drawing, in a stream-of-conscious manner, and paying close attention to unexpected narratives as they are revealed. All the while, I have some parameters in mind: for instance, this will be a landscape, there will be burned out trees, deer will live here. In these drawings, the resultant scenarios are my interpretations of current threats to deer: changes in their environment, fast moving vehicles, and the ever-popular hunting season.

The drawings also serve as a metaphor for my observations of our tenuous relationship to nature, the threats that humankind imposes on animals and consequently on ourselves. The back-story is that the deer population is increasing, thus deer are showing up in places we're not used to seeing them. In these four drawings there is an intentional sense of both panic and play. Who is panicking and who is not? And if a true threat exists, how safe are these deer, how lasting is their status? As if to answer that, the deer in drawings 1, 2 and 3 are made from a stamp, imprinting the deer onto the drawing in various states of solidity ranging from a solid black deer shape to sparse, broken apart, dissolving deer shapes. This stamped deer image is also a way to tally or count the fallen.

The method of depicting an object without much detail, and in an imagined setting can be seen in the conventions (mentioned above) used by the Surrealists and Dadaists. The magazine deer allude to my uses of commercially produced items combined with handmade work and also tie in with the overall theme of society's impact on nature. The use of collage in this manner can also be attributed to the Surrealist, Hannah Hoch. What is important in these drawings is not just the deer but also the settings they are in. These are imagined landscapes, composited from disjointed parts of nature. The unifying theme is that in each, the deer are exposed and have nowhere to hide and humankind has an incomplete picture of our own fragility and the destruction we inflict through our constant attempts to remain self sufficient and strong.



Fig. 11: Considering Muteness

Another drawing, *Considering Muteness* is strange. (See Figure 11) Strange in its composition, the disjointedness of objects and the confusion of scale. There is a formal division of space: foreground, middle ground and background, but any rules of scale break down as the images are drawn. The central dog image exists as a bust only

and this collie/greyhound-ish pooch appears to be wearing poorly drawn earmuffs and a muzzle. In front of him, but too small to actually be in his relative picture area, is a smoldering tree stump, behind him a trio of tree trunks that serve only to break the picture plane and allude to a larger landscape, but that give no clues as to the relationship of the dog to the fire and the other abstracted objects placed around as part doodle, part hint, part specter. The dog looks straight ahead with dignity, ignoring his surroundings and showing neither distress nor pain. He appears to be *thinking*.

While much of this piece was made using the same strategies employed in the *Deer Drawings* my intention for this piece was to bestow on the dog an unexpected self-awareness. The dog in this piece is as close to a cerebral self-portrait as my work gets. What I mean by this is that the dog represents thought, attention, and dignity in the midst of otherwise absurd surroundings. He is a stand-in for me and for the potential in other people. Are we humans also mute and deaf to our current conditions and to the knowledge that we can never truly master this dog's wild nature or *any* nature at all?

As another example of combining commercial representations of nature with hand-made, imagined representations of nature, *Pop Up Deer* (See Figure 1) is both etching and sculpture. There is an etching of a landscape populated with burned out tree stumps, a tube-shaped object that looks as though it could emit or take in sound, leaf-bird shapes that teeter on their tips and a barely discernable target with fouled arrows scattered at its base. In the sky, a structure on the right looks like a plan for the construction of some three-dimensional object. On the left, a structure of similar size describes a random, chaotic sweep of gesture and form, reaching out toward the rigid structure, attempting to consume it. Amidst all this is a small plastic deer. Again, as stated above, the deer is a stand-in, a double for itself and a mirror for mankind. The deer is set among the charred stumps that have been cut out of the flat picture plane and bent up to be vertical. The tube, called a sound tube, has also been cut out and

bent, as have parts of both structures in the sky. This piece, presented flat on a pedestal, invites the viewer to see it from a birds-eye view, to squint down on the timid deer and imagine a sound emitting from the tube. In doing so, we engage our sense of fantasy and play in sympathetic identification with the deer and ponder its vulnerability as well as surmise the conclusion of the piece.

Deer Pile (See Figure 5) is a sculpture made of store-bought, man-made objects: a bell jar, under which a pile of plastic toy deer rest on felt camouflage. Placed under the bell jar these deer have been reduced to manageable units and are contained in a manageable environment that doubles as a metaphor for culture's insensitive regard for nature. The deer appear whole and unscathed, their stiff legs, ears and antlers punctuating the air around them in the jar. However, these deer are just plastic toys that represent a real animal whose world is altered. They are functioning as a metaphor for a real condition. Deer are now a whole species under investigation, with ordinances regulating their management and harvesting. *Deer Pile* alludes to that investigation and to the conditions we have imposed on deer now, and is an expression of an attitude of disposal toward an inconvenient pest, the deer.

Deer Pile is one of a suite of small sculptures displayed under bell jars. These decorative, glass containers provide a controlled environment for these absurd combinations of materials and reinforce the idea that these are specimens under investigation and displayed for our curiosity and entertainment. The situations in each sculpture represent various human conditions such as deception in *Impostor*, greed in *More Than He Could Chew*, and denial in *Hide and Seek*, played out through the use of artificial animal stand-ins.

Figures 12 – 16: Reminders: creatures from an imagined tomorrow



Fig. 12: Wanderer



Fig. 13: Jumpy



Fig. 14: Seeker



Fig. 15: Burdened



Fig. 16: Panic

By using more toys in the service of my current concerns and concepts, I have created *Remainders: creatures from an imagined tomorrow*. (See Figures 12-16) In this suite of mechanical sculptures, the titles of each one describes the concern they represent: Wanderer: aimless search with fruitless results; Jumpy: anxiety in the pursuit of happiness; Panic: fleeing the oppression of artificial beauty; Seeker: tethered to a repeated history; Burdened: exhausted by the weight of beauty. In making these moving sculptures, I have used materials that I dislike, that I think represent a society intent on freezing the look of nature, without all the mess, the inconvenience, and the risk of death. Using materials for which I have little respect gives me the freedom to deconstruct and reuse them in a way that points to their ridiculousness and failure to convey any of the grace embodied by the real things they mimic. I have come to like these materials, however, through the process of repurposing them for *my* purpose. I enjoy the aspects of absurdity and surprise that they convey in their new role.

In *Consumed/Engulfed*, some kind of disaster has occurred. (See Figure 3) The animals in this sculpture certainly have a new role. No animal is left untouched whether they are engulfed in tar, or witnessing the tragedy of others. The small size of the sculpture suggests that it is a maquette, and it is a maquette for global changes that effect all species on earth. Plastic animals are part of a successful illusion. Because we have become so removed from real wild animals in our lives^{vii} and so familiar and comfortable with artificial representations, it is not a long shot to assume that the viewer will empathize with these animals and actually *feel* some distress at the representation of their distress. We so fully suspend our disbelief.

When using tar or asphalt as a material in my work, I acknowledge my contemporaries who use those materials as well. Mark Dion's piece "Tar and Feather" has had an influence on my understanding of the visual language inherent in the silhouette. From Dion's piece it is clear to me that even altered, an animal in any

recognizable form still carries with it the meaning we have bestowed upon it. Dion's tarred animals, now condensed to a silhouette, and the animals in "Consumed/Engulfed" informed my decisions in the piece "Memory: March 2009 – September 2009." (See Figure 17) My use of the silhouette in that piece is supported by the notion that a silhouette can convey open-ended meaning that leaves room for a viewer's personal experience.



Fig. 17: *Memory: March 2009 – September 2009 (Mined for the purpose of creating a visual documentation of consumerism, nature and 48 years of life experience.)* Detail

Memory: March 2009 – September 2009 (Mined for the purpose of creating a visual documentation of consumerism, nature and 48 years of life experience.) is the title of this large piece with Mylar silhouettes adhered to Kozoshi paper printed with wood grain. To make sense of this piece is to tap into our own place in both the spiritual and material realm. Are we *of nature* or *of society*? Are we commercial beings, propelled along by our need to satisfy our desires with material things or are we content with things of the spirit; those that cannot be bought, possessed, or held on to? I assert that we are both; we must be both because we are made from nature and it is *in our nature* to move forward. The hunt for food and shelter has simply progressed into the hunt for other forms of sustenance and more variety and comfort in our homes. Many of these silhouetted objects represent my own longing and desire as well, not just those of the society around me.

In formal terms, *Memory: March 2009 – September 2009* uses proximity, scale, shape, color and value to create the initial illusion of a cloud of smoke. That is how it is intended to read from 30 or 40 feet away. The piece is approximately eight feet by sixteen feet. It is a large, graphic representation of smoke that upon closer inspection reveals that it is made of hundreds of silhouettes, some overlapping, some not. Because of it's size, clear investigation can begin at about ten feet away. A viewer, when standing close to the center of the piece, cannot take it in all at once. It extends beyond peripheral vision.

Therefore, an examination of parts is required. It is while doing this that stories are revealed and questions posed. Each silhouette contains a memory; it's own story that is specific to me, but open ended enough to allow the viewer to make up their own. A car with a rounded hood becomes an island when seen with a camel atop it. A gun appears to be aiming at an unsuspecting rodent. And just behind that gun is a hooded Klu Klux Klan member with a torch. This complicates the reading and urges on more

investigation. There are absurd juxtapositions, such as a buck adorned with a huge blossom and there is humor in these object-pairings; a humor that invites the viewer to discover some of the more serious issues that exist at a second level of understanding. A small grey bi-plane is flying away from the unmistakable twin towers. A goat or antelope stands on a chair inches away from the jaws of a crocodile.

This collection of silhouettes is also an index of experiences and memories with no ranking of importance in their placement. The cloud of smoke dissipates across and out of the upper right corner of the piece. Each silhouette, depending on its placement next to, over or under another, may retain or lose its individual character. These appearing and disappearing identities change the meaning of any group of silhouettes, encouraging, on the part of the viewer, a hide and seek pursuit that traverses the entire piece. The process of looking and questioning is an active one, and the reward is a fresh interpretation of these objects that take on new meaning when they are placed next to something unexpected. What I want viewers to take away is the unveiling of the objects as familiar and connected to their own lives.

The silhouette is a way to *condense* a subject, a larger issue, or memory into a single icon that carries meaning and connections regarding the object that the silhouette portrays. In *Memory: March 2009 – September 2009* the longer a viewer looks at a particular silhouette, the greater the associations. Each silhouette contains within it the potential to stimulate the viewer's own narratives, unconstrained by mine.

The bulk of this piece is the two-dimensional paper panels with silhouettes on the wall, but there is also a three-dimensional component. Below the panels, on the left side I placed a dead, leafless bush with gnarled branches. The bush has been pruned to exaggerate its visual movement and to indicate that the silhouette-filled smoke is originating there. The bush has also been painted gloss black. Around the base of the bush is a layer of cocoa mulch, used in landscaping. As its name would imply, the

mulch smells of chocolate. By adding these natural objects (a real bush and real cocoa shells) to an otherwise man-made artwork portraying representations of real objects, I reinforce the collision between nature and man-made. I also point to our efforts (as shown by *my* efforts) to control nature through the obvious pruning and painting of the bush and the imposition of the chocolate scent on the environment, in this case, the gallery. Since this scent will permeate the whole gallery, it is my intent that the power of scent in this setting will jar the viewer out of the comfort of expectations and alert them to other unexpected experiences in all of the work.

CONCLUSION

It's been over forty years since I built those forts in the woods. The lessons learned during that time continue to fuel my work and stimulate my curiosity. While I still long for those connections, we live in a very different world now, and I bring a different person to it. However, what was important to me then, is still important to me now. My role in nature, as part of humankind, is to pay attention, practice responsible stewardship and inspire the same in others.

My role as an artist has been solidified over the last few years. Through the making of this body of work I have learned that my role as an artist is to challenge my own assumptions, ignite my imagination, surprise myself and continue to learn through the practice of research and the creative process.

My artwork provides me with the opportunity to explore issues in a tangible way. I find that my studio practice is one of exploration and I move fluidly from the language of printmaking, with its elegant line, to the language of object-making with its material-based surprises. From a random-choice-device such as a game board spinner, to the white-flash-at-night collision with a mother deer, my influences during the last two years have been varied, unexpected and challenging. I'd say they've been absurd.

And with each absurdity, there is a choice. Mine is to embrace the absurd, accept the unexpected and re-present it in a way so as to examine its validity and role in my life. I share my examinations of these situations through my art and encourage others to examine them as well. Does it make a difference? I believe it does. Does it change the world? Maybe just the small part around me, but it is my hope that this is at least a start.

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NOTES

ⁱ Bulliet, Richard W., *Hunters, Herders, and Hamburgers: The Past and Future of Human-Animal Relationships*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.

ⁱⁱ McKibben, Bill, *The Bill McKibben Reader: Pieces from an Active Life*. New York, Henry Holt and Company, 2008, p. 297.

ⁱⁱⁱ Lifton, Robert Jay and Humphrey, Nicholas, eds. *In a Dark Time: Images for Survival*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1984.

^{iv} Silentio, Johannes de. *Fear and Trembling*. Penguin Classics, p. 17.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Bois, Buchloh, Foster and Krauss, *Art Since 1900, vol. 1*, Thames & Hudson Inc., 2004, p. 190.

^{vii} Turner, Jack, *The Abstract Wild*, The University of Arizona Press, 1996, p. 32.